"Ever Threatened… Ever in Need:" Alexander Manly's Confrontation with the Democratic Campaign in 1898 North Carolina

by
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In his response to Georgian Rebecca Latimer Felton's speech on the vulnerability of poor white farm women, Alexander Manly, the African American editor of the Wilmington *Daily Record*, challenged white conceptions of race and gender, inadvertently lending support to the white supremacy campaign led by Democrats in North Carolina in 1898. He exposed the tenuous nature of white male authority and inspired the destruction of his newspaper office on November 10, 1898. In order to understand this act of terrorism and the violence that ensued, it is helpful to understand the psychology of the southern white male and the campaign that capitalized on his anger and fears.

In the late nineteenth century, southerners, much like other Americans, experienced the growing pains that accompanied industrialization and urbanization. Young men and women left rural homes in pursuit of opportunities for employment and amusement in the region's growing urban areas. Within public settings such as the factory and the dance hall, they interacted regularly. White society faced the prospect that women, deemed by some as passionless and placed upon a pedestal, in actuality possessed the same desires as men. Beyond the influence of their families, these women might choose sexual partners, including African American men, according to their own desires. In order to control these young women and their desires, southern white society developed the myth of the "black beast rapist." According to historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, the image of a hypersexual black male "plant[ed] fear in women's minds and dependency in their hearts. It thrust them in the role of personal property or sexual objects, ever threatened by black men's lust, ever in need of white men's protection."[1]

One must realize that the rape myth inspired the sincere belief among whites that black men were intent upon raping white women. The generations of black and white southerners coming of age in the New South lacked the knowledge of one another that slavery had provided for their parents, and whites found reason to distrust the "New Negro." Theories that described the degeneracy of the African American born into freedom circulated throughout the country, and the virility of the black male became a popular topic among southern orators and writers. As a result of the changing nature of southern society, many whites believed that their way of life was in jeopardy. Whites believed that civilization passed from one generation to the next through blood, and the rhetoric of white supremacy implanted the seed of civilization in white

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[1] For a discussion of the changes underway in the South after Reconstruction, see Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996), pg. 72, 94-96; Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pg. 245, 254; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence" in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): pg. 339. For further readings on the southern rape complex, see Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Pres, 2000); Lisa Lundquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).